

# In Some Sense

EDUARDO VIVEIROS DE CASTRO

*Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro*

It is an honour to be invited to respond to this essay by G.E.R. Lloyd, in which our esteemed colleague summarizes the argument of *Cognitive Variations*, a book that immediately became a landmark in the contemporary debate on the nature (and culture) of human cognition, upon its publication (Lloyd 2007). I believe that Professor Lloyd saw my participation in this volume as a way to develop our dialogue on ‘the major issue of ontologies’, since it is on this topic, in Chapter 7 of *Cognitive Variations*, that the author explores and discusses certain conclusions of my ethnographic work on Amazonian cosmological thought.<sup>1</sup> I shall certainly not ignore this generous suggestion; but neither can I fail to make some observations on the essay (and the book) as a whole, which I will do here by highlighting the originality of the author’s method of analysing the controversy between ‘cross-cultural universalists’ and ‘cultural relativists’, before indicating aspects of his argument that seem, to me, to be subject to some additional qualification or clarification.

## In praise of multiplicity

*Cognitive Variations*, in all its pellucid simplicity and unique argumentative poise, is a book that contains extremely complex movements, as well as moments of provocative perplexity. The composed, firm and courteous style of the author does not obscure the passionate nature of his intervention in a controversy to which he has already given two suggestively ambiguous titles. If ‘cognitive variations’ can be read as describing both what the book *is* and as referring to what it is *about* (one is reminded of ‘name of the song’ the White Knight sung to Alice), the title of the essay at times seems to conceal a disquieting ‘or’ (exclusive or inclusive?) underneath the bland ‘and’ of ‘History and Human Nature’. Thus, Lloyd is able to expose the controversy, dissolve it and somehow take sides in it, all at the same time. Consider for example the hope ‘to reconcile our evident psychic diversity with our shared humanity’, expressed as the author approaches the end of his essay (Lloyd 2010, 212); it is not exactly formulated in conciliatory terms since our shared humanity no longer finds itself founded on the venerable dogma of the ‘psychic unity of mankind’, that even the cultural relativists have difficulty in challenging openly. ‘Our evident psychic diversity’ is a very bold and liberating thing to say, from the perspective of our shared and (in many senses) problematic humanity. Our shared diversity, then? If so, count me in.

In any case, it is no exaggeration to say that the position adopted by Lloyd is polemic (like his Greeks), even though the author (like his Chinese) does not appreciate strong disagreements and sweeping generalizations, and concerns himself above all in distinguishing nuances, relativizing contrasts and highlighting variations. The pluralism defended by Lloyd takes him much closer to what one could fearlessly call relativism — which has little to do with the cultural-linguistic determinism that is at times identified by this label (including by Lloyd) — than to the epistemological supremacism and monolithic ontology so frequently associated with cross-cultural universalists. The attitude that the author challenges is, above all, that embodied in the normative archetype of ‘Science’: methodological and epistemological uniformity, nomothetic generalization posited as the absolute ideal of knowledge, the various (or perhaps not so various) monocausal or unidimensional determinisms. ‘Plasticity’, ‘complexity’, ‘variety’, ‘diversity’, ‘multidimensionality’: these are words that constantly recur in his work, giving it the general tone of a vigorous vindication of multiplicity. At the same time, these words are contrasted, as it were pre-emptively, with a negative limit to which they might seem to veer dangerously, designated by the terrible word ‘incommensurability’.

The absence of any emerging consensus from the controversy is highlighted by Lloyd. The disagreements include the definition or identification of the species’ cognitive faculties, their somatic (and/or extra-somatic) localization, their mode of function, their conditions of development and transformation, among many other issues; to the point that the question of universality or otherwise of human cognition does not appear to allow a simple answer: ‘where general lessons have been suggested, these often differ radically’ (Lloyd 2010, 201). The first impression that the reader has is that Lloyd laments this situation, and that his work thus consists of celebrating well established conclusions, no matter how superficial they may be, and the convergence of different approaches, no matter how approximate. This is definitively not the case. In truth, and in perfect coherence with his anti-determinist pluralism, Lloyd appears to draw a general lesson from this lack of generality; a lesson that is not only analytical or ‘therapeutic’, but which has implications for the substantive debate. The very existence of divergence between different visions of human cognition teaches us something about this phenomenon, namely that it manifests a great formal diversity of interaction with its content. In its turn, this content (what there is to be cognized) is characterized by an objective, actual multidimensionality; for this very reason, when cognition turns in on itself reflexively, it confronts a no less multidimensional reality. Cognitive variation thus appears twice, in its subjective or active aspect and in its objective or passive aspect: variation over variation.

Lloyd’s global position on the global theses under debate is precisely that they should not be taken as global. The dichotomy between ‘realists’ (or naturalists-universalists) and ‘relativists’ (or culturalists-particularists) does not define mutually exclusive or exhaustive alternatives. First, the author shows the non-exclusivity of the alternatives, in the dual sense that, depending on the phenomena or cognitive capacities being considered, the

cross-cultural commonalities can be more or less evident or important than cultural differences and that, in *any* case (i.e. the specific issue in question), 'the truth does not all lie with one party or with the other' (Lloyd 2007, 5); 'the recommendation I would make would incorporate features of both approaches' (Lloyd 2010, note 3).

But the author does not content himself with this seemingly classic halfway solution to the controversy; his second and strongest analytical move is made in order to show the non-exhaustive nature of the alternatives, that is to indicate an alternative to these alternatives: the thesis that the individual exercise of cognitive faculties 'is not totally determined by either factor or by the combination of both' (Lloyd 2007, 38). In other words, *both* the poles of the dichotomy are finally discarded as realist and determinist. Effectively, what Lloyd calls cultural relativism only differs from cross-cultural universalism in extension; it is equally naturalizing and essentialist — each culture is conceived as a natural species, defined by a homogeneous and univocally determined cognitive 'eth(n)ogram'. Reciprocally, the cross-cultural search for universals can be seen merely as an expanded version of the same particularist parochialism. It is curious to note how Darwin's great lesson, which showed the continuity between the human species and the totality of living beings, is frequently flouted or inverted by the universalists when they go in search of what is *specifically* human, namely, 'those principal differentiae that mark out the human species as such' (Lloyd 2010, 3). The difference between naturalist or culturalist particularism is, in the final analysis, merely relative.<sup>2</sup>

In his present essay, the first task that Lloyd sets himself is to discover if the parties in the dispute 'are merely talking past one another'; in other words, if they are or are not talking about the same things and, therefore, whether they agree on what they disagree about.<sup>3</sup> I note that Lloyd's question suggests that the problem of possible incommensurability — or worse, of unintelligibility — does not feature only between cultures, but within the same intellectual tradition and the same historical period. Up to a certain point, Lloyd does not fail to validate this possibility, in offering his 'two lines of attack' to adjudicate the debate between uniformitarians and differentialists (Lloyd 2010, 204):

- (1) The idea of 'styles of inquiry', which refers to divergent manners of object- and problem-construction characteristic of different disciplines or wider intellectual orientations. This idea would appear to support the interpretation that not only are the opponents not just *not* speaking about the *same* things, but that, in principle, there is no reason to pronounce in favour of the greater reality of this or that 'thing' (human psychic unity or diversity, for example). This is because the styles of inquiry or reasoning have a 'self-authenticating' character, incorporating 'different criteria by which an investigation is to be judged' (Lloyd 2007, 6–7, n.3). Lloyd observes that:

Those criteria may indeed be sometimes incommensurable with one another, but that does not imply any mutual unintelligibility between the enquiries, which will rather be complementary to one another in so far as they relate to different aspects of the phenomena in question.

For the record, this is the only positive or at least neutral mention that the notion of incommensurability receives in *Cognitive Variations*; the negative horizon has been moved here to the notion of unintelligibility, a notion that effectively (by definition!) traces the absolute limits of any notion of knowledge. It remains to be seen whether certain parties to the present controversy are not, unfortunately, well past those limits.

- (2) The much more radical notion of the 'multidimensionality of the phenomena', which is an objective or 'realist' thesis (the notion of stylistic diversity is, rather, subjective or relativist). It suggests that the parties in the dispute — exactly like the different intellectual traditions, thought collectives, linguistic communities, in short, the sundry cultural variations registered by history and anthropology, and which are the object of the controversy itself — in some sense *cannot* be speaking of the same things, for the simple reason that the things themselves are never the same, or rather that they are not the same *as themselves*: things are not univocal, but multivocal. Thus, while Lloyd maintains a distance from the hypothesis of a multiplicity of worlds, he infuses multiplicity into all of the denizens of the/his world: Lloyd's, like Mary Midgley's (the phrase is hers), seems to be 'one world, but a BIG one'. We should observe, however, that how and to what degree this multidimensionality is distributed amongst the phenomena is not clear, nor can we say how it is semantically projected; but the idea suggests something like an ontology of infinitude or (at least) of continuity, justifying the conclusion that the cognitive contents capable of being generated from (and about) the phenomena are *a priori* indeterminate.

As I have already said, both ideas seem to be very close to a relativist position. A third motive that spans all of Lloyd's commentary shows the situation to be more complex than that, however: namely the importance of both intra-cultural variations (the historically-verified possibility of radically divergent ontologies expressed in a single language by members of the same culture and society) and infra-cultural variations (physical, biological and neurophysiological variations between individuals as well as groups) aside from inter-cultural variations. Add that third motive and we are led to conclude that the study of human cognition has more lessons to be extracted from the various forms of diversity that make it partially indeterminable than from the relatively uninformative, though undisputably determining, commonalities which contribute to its constitution. History wins the game: when dealing with human nature, at least — that part of nature we call human or vice versa — contingency appears to occupy more squares on the board than necessity.

## Lessons from the Ancients

The method adopted in *Cognitive Variations* to analyse the controversy may not surprise Lloyd's habitual readers. The effects it affords are particularly

efficient in promoting a remarkable epistemological deflation of both the theses involved.

The book is structured in a clear pattern. Most of the chapters begin with an exposition of the results of cross-cultural research that point to the existence of robust cognitive universals (colour perception, animal taxonomies, emotions, causality); next, Lloyd indicates the deficiencies and contradictions of the methods employed and/or the superficiality of the conclusions supported by the universalist camp; to conclude, the author surveys the positions argued in ancient Greek and Chinese texts that have some relation to the themes of contemporary research. At times, he shows the partial convergence between ancient thought and contemporary universalist theses; at others (and much more often), Lloyd highlights a triple divergence: between the 'ancients' and the 'moderns' with respect to the content of these supposed universals; between the Greek and Chinese texts; and between the different opinions to be found in the interior of each of these two ancient intellectual traditions. Other chapters of *Cognitive Variations* discuss the results of research that find culturally-dependent cognitive variations (spatial orientation, general ontological schemata). Despite clearly sympathizing with such research, Lloyd applies the same comparative-deconstructive method of juxtaposition with the Greek and Chinese texts, aiming to neutralize all essentialist or determinist implications of the research — whether emphasizing the capacity for reflexive problematization of the basic cognitive-cultural frames (and thus for the transcendence of said frames) shown by classical writers, or by refusing the possible suggestion of cultural incommensurability or untranslatability between Ancients and Moderns, anthropologists and natives, Greek and Chinese. The final chapter, 'Reason', is unilaterally polemic: it is dedicated to demolishing the thesis that there are basic differences of mentality or ways of thinking between cultural macro-groups such as 'Westerners' versus 'East Asians'. His principal target here is Nisbett; but Luria, whom Lloyd discusses in the chapter on causality and inference, and Lévy-Bruhl, evoked (a tad stereotypically) as patron of the theory of the primitive mentality, are also criticized. It is in this chapter that we are directly confronted with the intellectual style that the author rejects *in toto*: the hyper-essentializing combination of generalization and asymmetric dichotomization that opposes entities which, in themselves, are already the result of an unacceptable lumping. Thus, Nisbett's 'East Asians' include Chinese, Chinese Americans, Koreans and Japanese; his 'Westerners' include, as well as the usual suspects grouped by nationality, 'blacks, whites and Hispanics' that live in America (or should we have said, 'the United States?'). The anti-essentialist argument applies for the ancient Greeks and Chinese as well, of course:

[T]he folly of generalising even about just the ancient Greeks as a whole is revealed by the fact that on such key topics as agency, causation, change, the emotions, even the analysis of colour, there were fundamental disagreements as between the Presocratics, the atomists, Aristotle, the Stoic and other Hellenistic philosophers, Epicureans and Sceptics. No more is there uniformity on cognitive issues across the Chinese writers of the classical period... even though their public expressions of disagreement were in many cases less strident than those of the Greeks. (Lloyd 2010, 204)

The precise significance of the recourse to the Greek and Chinese documents in Lloyd's argument is, to my understanding, the most complex and delicate point of *Cognitive Variations*; here is where doubts, or objections, can appear which require consideration. The passage cited encapsulates these problems.

First, and with due apologies for the obvious nature of the objection, I ask: if generalizing about the ancient Greeks as a whole is folly, what is the legitimate scope of generalization? For, naturally, one can argue that 'the Presocratics' or 'the Stoic philosophers' are already substantial generalizations, that labels such as 'Hellenistic epoch' gloss over important differences, and even that 'Aristotle' is a name whose univocal relation to a spatio-temporally and conceptually continuous work is somewhat problematic. This all without mentioning the Chinese texts, whose association to the names of single authors is perhaps even more enigmatic (though I admit I know nothing of this). Even if a group of texts can be identified with a historical individual, there are no self-evident reasons to generalize across the whole life and work of an author — rumour has it there are two Wittgensteins, two Marxes, perhaps three Kants, a number of Heideggers. . . The emphasis Lloyd gives to inter-individual differences, with the methodologically laudable intention of avoiding a double homogenization, a biological one on the species plane, a cultural one on the plane of social collectivities, should not lead, in principle, to the essentialization of the individual as a cognitive atom. Reciprocally, the absence of internal uniformity on both sides of the Greek/Chinese contrast did not prevent the author from venturing a generalization, even if statistical ('in many cases'), about certain attitudes that distinguish the respective traditions of intellectual debate.

I believe that this problem does not permit a single response. For the question does not seem to me to be whether it is legitimate to generalize, but rather when, to what end and how it is legitimate. For it is inevitable. Lloyd states: 'to try to generalise about the Greeks as a whole is a trap; we do not, after all, generalise about ourselves' (Lloyd 2010, 206). I beg to differ: 'we' (a generalization if ever there was one?) do generalize about ourselves a lot, perhaps as often as not. Besides, generalization is not only a cognitive operation, but also a crucially important sociological and political procedure, and naturally of no less risk than the cognitive one.

I believe that the question to put is therefore: is there *any* context (or style) of inquiry in which the reference to 'Greek thought' ('as a whole') is justified? It seems to be easier, for example, to find examples of 'substance-based ontologies' among Greek than Chinese authors, the latter tending to favour 'process-based ontologies' (Lloyd 2010, 208–209). Naturally there is the arguable case of Heraclitus' processual ontology, but as Lloyd intimates, Aristotle's ontology has more in common with Democritus', in spite of the radical difference between continuism and atomism, than with Heraclitus', which was considered to be unintelligible ('incoherent') by the Stagyrte. It would therefore not be completely absurd to propose at least some degree of correlation between Greek 'philosophy' and substantialist ontologies, on the one hand, and Chinese 'wisdom' and processual conceptions, on the other. Thanks to Lloyd, this does not prevent us from noticing — just to carry on with the question of generalizational pertinence — that the Greeks and the Chinese perhaps shared certain characteristics that conjointly distinguished



them from smaller-scale, non-literate cultures, such as, precisely, a great internal plurality of opinions and views.

In *Cognitive Variations* (Lloyd 2007, 82), the author contrasts his method with that of anthropology, stating that the study of complex ancient civilizations has the merit of making visible the great internal diversity of the societies studied — which is not always the case with modern anthropology — thus showing that language or the basic cultural schemata of a society do not constrain ideational variation in any major sense. Perhaps Lloyd underestimates a little the fact that the intellectual economy of sociocultural multiplicities such as ancient China or Greece (a ‘civilization’ is a cultural multiplicity produced through the generalization of certain institutions and practices; in other words, it is a regime of variation endowed with its own consistency) offers much more space for the systematic proliferation of differences than what obtains in a contemporary Amazonian society of 150 people; nevertheless, his point is considerably important. The author seems to be suggesting that any Great Divide between so-called complex civilizations and the ‘small tradition’ non-literate cultures is illusory. (The former are characterized by singular historical developments and strong intellectual dynamism. The latter are always viewed as simple objects, be it as the monolithic incarnations of unique, i.e. untranslatable cultural essences, or as indifferently representative, i.e. synonymous expressions of the basal metabolism of human cognition: they are, that is, ‘natural cultures’ which are therefore more amenable to analytic reduction by the cognitive sciences.) There is indeed a certain widespread tendency to conceive of Greek philosophy or Chinese wisdom as specific innovations, associated with particular historico-political events and contexts, while Algonquin mythology or Amazonian shamanism, for example, are placed within an extra-historical (at most pre-historical) background of pan-human cognitive homogeneity, a background against which the inventions of Greek, Chinese and other ‘great’ civilizations stand out.<sup>4</sup>

It is exactly because it *opposes* this tendency that the systematic comparative usage of classical materials in *Cognitive Variations* permits the destabilization of the controversy between universalists and particularists. Both parties need to exclude variation from their conceptual horizon, be it by making it superficial, supervenient and extrinsic (in the case of universalists), or by expelling it to the exterior of culture, that is, to the logical or ontological interval *between* cultures (in the case of particularists), which are then conceived as auto-identical essences defined by the absence or insignificance of internal variation, as milieus of absolute interiority ‘hermetically sealed off from one another’ (Lloyd 2010, p. 21). As Lévi-Strauss proposed some time ago, however, it is far more realistic to treat human cultures as constituting meta-stable configurations of multidimensional variations — configurations that are strictly definable as reciprocal variants of one another and thus intrinsically subject to historical and structural transformation (Lévi-Strauss, 1962). I would risk saying that we are not so far from Lloyd here.

The second problem that seems to me to be implicated in Lloyd’s systematic triangulation on the cognitive unity or diversity of the species through the use of classical materials is either a very big one, or a very false one. In either case, it is better, as with the proverbial Nietzschean cold bath, to enter and exit it quickly.

Lloyd establishes a *continuous* passage between the explicit conceptual reflections of Greek or Chinese thinkers, expressed in codified and often auto-objectified practices, and what is assumed to be the case in contemporary debates about cognition for infra-conscious neurophysiology or implicit, pre-conscious conceptual, linguistic and symbolic schemata. The problem is knowing if it is legitimate to compare the fact of a philosophical divergence with the hypothesis of a cognitive difference ('natural' or 'cultural'), or inversely, a convergence of expressions or argumentative actualizations with a commonality of processes or mental virtualities — even if it is to conclude, for example, that 'the differences expressed [by the ancient thinkers] cannot be put down either to the cognitive equipment or to the general cultural background of the debaters'.

This doubt is raised because Lloyd defends, at various points in his work, two theses that are completely justified, but that cannot be applied 'at the same time, in the same respect, and in the same relation' (to coin a phrase) without suggesting a certain impression of contradiction. On the one hand, the author affirms that the absence of a word in a certain language does not entail the absence of the concept denoted by it in other languages (Lloyd 2007, 60, 64); and even the observation of the absence of a concept in certain societies 'should not be confused with a denial that they have an implicit grasp of that domain' (132). On the other hand, 'there is a fundamental difference between an implicit assumption and an explicit concept... ' (134). If the first of these arguments allows one to shuttle inferentially in a relatively smooth way between explicit and implicit modes of cognitive operation (seeing as there is no unilateral implication between these modes), the second<sup>5</sup> would already make the recourse to reflections produced in Greece or China more problematic in adjudicating a controversy that turns essentially on the deep structures of human cognition. How can we conciliate these two theses?

This is a possible difficulty, however, for Lloyd more than for the present author, since I had already evoked it when describing Lloyd's comparative method in the first part of this commentary, but phrasing it as a solution rather than as a problem. I deem perfectly legitimate — actually, I see it as a methodological requirement (Viveiros de Castro 2003; 2009) — to place in epistemic continuity the explicit reflections of thinkers in any culture (ancient or modern, literate or not) and the equally explicit reflections of scientists and other contemporary scholars concerning any subject, including, of course, the question of determining what would be the implicit assumptions and conditions of human (or other) cognition. The question of the unity versus diversity of the human mind, as any other humanly conceivable question, can be translated into any cultural idiom, and reformulated in terms of any intellectual tradition. The interest of the exercise lies, naturally, in reflecting on the variations — or experientially verifying the transformations — that the question must undergo before it receives what may be counted as a response, and which will forcibly modify the terms of the question. These modifications will provide a good 'measure of the incommensurability' (the distance) between the traditions in question. Which is not the same as finally finding a neutral vantage point from which to adjudicate the controversy:



When we encounter apparently radically different world-views or values, the reactions of the two schools of thought are very different. The unitarians will argue that these differences can be adjudicated. The relativists will insist that there is no neutral vantage point from which that can be done (Lloyd 2007, 3).

I believe that this description can be reflexively applied, and that the Greek and Chinese materials do not constitute a neutral vantage point from which to adjudicate the controversy itself between the unitarian and the relativist 'schools' (83). Thus, what the recourse to *really* 'radically different world-views and values' perhaps permits is the conclusion that certain differences are not as radical as they appear to be. Which takes us to the third and last point of this commentary.

### On the multidimensionality of incommensurability

The chapter 'Nature versus Culture Reassessed' can be called the 'holographic moment' of *Cognitive Variations*. Here we are no longer dealing with the identification of which aspects of cognition refer to natural commonalities and which can be attributed to cultural differences. (I refer to the common understanding that what is perceived as cross-culturally similar — a far from simple operation — 'should' belong to human nature, and what is different, especially if the difference recurs among members of the same collectivity, 'should' belong to culture.) Rather, we turn to asking whether the very dichotomy between nature and culture is an anthropological universal — an invariant structure of human cognition, even if it is actualized in a culturally variable form —, or whether it is a historically overloaded polarity: the burdened inheritance of Greek metaphysics and Western cultural politics at large. In the last case, its transposition to other 'world-views' would be a form of conceptual colonialism, to the extent that other traditions of thought ignore this dichotomy altogether or (what amounts to the same thing) deform it beyond recognition — beyond, that is, all hope of intelligibility.

Lloyd's general conclusion is not without irony: the idea of nature is society-specific, while the idea of culture ('some notion of culture or society') — of a distinctive way of life of the subject-collectivity — would be universal. In other words, bizarrely, the dichotomy is not universal, but one of its terms is (under *some* interpretation). But then, one could argue that *some* notion of nature — for example, nature as anti-culture or extra-culture, the negative or the background of the self-image of the socius — should be admitted as a legitimate candidate to some sort of universality.

The specific idea of nature to which the author refuses universality is the notion of *phusis*, which was mobilized early on in Greece in the interests of a multi-pronged polemic — medical, political, epistemic — in which *phusis* was either counterposed to or served as measure and model for *nomos* as mere habit or convention. As we know, the plurivocality of the Greek *phusis*, a descriptive-cum-normative category of the given, and its opposition to an 'instituted' order was inherited by our philosophical tradition, which transformed it into one of its favourite 'weapons of mass intellectual destruction' (Lloyd, personal communication, 2009). On the other hand, when we move to China, we notice the radical absence of any contrast between

nature and culture — human and cosmic orders form a seamless whole in complex interaction. This contrast between presence and absence of the contrast in ancient Eurasian traditions gives Lloyd reason to cast doubt on the naturalness of the dichotomy.<sup>6</sup> Armed with the double precaution to which I have already referred, namely the relevance of the distinction between explicit and implicit categories and, at the same time, the fact that the absence of an explicit category does not entail the non-existence of the implicit recognition of a domain, the author turns to quickly review the uses of the nature/culture by Rodney Needham, with his inventories of dual classifications, and Lévi-Strauss, with his interpretation of Amerindian mythology as organized around this contrast. In both cases, the pretensions of the dichotomy to (implicit or explicit) universality are found wanting.<sup>7</sup>

And thus, we arrive at Lloyd's discussion of my and Philippe Descola's analyses of the ontological presuppositions of other societies that do not correspond to the terms of the nature/culture opposition which underlies all Western anthropology. Both investigators share the same ethnographic starting point — the characteristic 'animism' of Amazonian thought — and the way in which they construct their alternatives to the classic dichotomy, namely, the disassociation of the paradigmatic equivalence between nature, universality and materiality (or corporality), on the one hand, and culture, particularity and humanity (or spirituality), on the other. But there are important differences between our approaches. Descola proposes a typology of four ontologies — animism, totemism, analogism, naturalism — conceived as the resultant of the discrete combination of two terms, the corporeal and spiritual dimension of beings, with two relations between them, continuity and discontinuity (Descola 2005). My analysis, rather differently and more simply, focuses on the antipodal contrast between Amazonian 'multinaturalist perspectivism' and Occidental 'multiculturalist naturalism'. It is not taxonomic but experimental. Rather than proposing *combinations*, it focuses on the *deformations* suffered by the ideas of nature and culture, when we decide to subordinate them to the reference frames of other intellectual traditions, rather than apply them to the latter as if those two ideas were the master key of all possible anthropology. And the spirit of my investigation is not strictly scientific or objectivist ('naturalist'), but, rather, philosophical or reflexive ('perspectivist') — it aims to bring to light Western anthropology's presuppositions by analysing them through the conceptual apparatus of Amazonian anthropology. (I am of course generalizing in both directions.)

In this way, I came to contrast the Amazonian thesis of ontological multiplicity with the modern Western thesis of epistemological pluralism. In the Amazonian 'perspectivist' world, all beings partake of a shared humanity, expressed in the possession of the same type of 'soul' (or, as we would say nowadays, the same 'cognitive equipment'), something which makes culture or society coextensive with the cosmos; the differences between the species and other types of beings are given — or rather, they must be constructed — by their characteristic corporeal constitutions, their 'natures'.<sup>8</sup> The Amazonian motto 'one culture, many natures' was formulated in these terms as a technique of contrast (in the laboratory sense of the term) with the pair 'one nature, many cultures', which may be taken as the insignia of Western ethno-anthropology. It should be understood as encapsulating, not so much a

substantive property of Amazonian conceptual systems as a reactive property (again, in the chemical sense). But the fact that it is contrastive and relational does not make it less of an *ontological* property, concerning the nature of the alterity that disjunctively connects anthropological and indigenous concepts.

While Lloyd considers the results obtained by Descola and me with unmistakable sympathy, he does not fail to express a few misgivings about some of their possible implications. Before all else, however, it is worth stressing that our work has obvious analogies to Lloyd's own method — as he has taught, we dissolved a vicious philosophical controversy or an automatized, obsolescent conceptual polarity in the powerful acid of alterity, showing the distortions that the unreflected projection of auto-anthropological categories impose on other societies' ways of peopling and furnishing the universe. Aside from that, it is amusing to observe that the 'Amerindian' and 'Eurasian' alternatives that are the result of the dissolution of the controversy are perhaps not, at least formally, utterly disparate. Thus, for example, the chiasmatic inversion proposed by Lloyd of the extension and intension (if that is really what it is about!) of our concepts of nature and culture does not fail to converge — albeit clearly in an quasi-metaphorical sense<sup>9</sup> — with the conclusions that I myself reached on Amerindian perspectivism, where 'culture' or 'society' would be a universal and integrative property (shared by all beings in the cosmos), while 'nature', understood as the species-specific distribution of corporeal shapes and behaviours, would be a particularizing or differentiating dimension. At least we could say that Amerindian multinaturalist perspectivism and Lloyd's general anthropological conclusion can be seen as transformational variants within a multidimensional or continuous virtual series — one having more parameters or modulations than Descola's double bipartition — which would include, among its diverse theoretical states and without any privileged value, the nature/culture dichotomy as has been canonically interpreted by Western anthropology. If that reading is admissible, let us note in passing, the supposed problem of incommensurability becomes immediately a little less unmanageable.

But let's get back to Lloyd's warnings. In the case of Descola's typology, the problem would be the sharply discontinuous character of the quadripartite matrix that makes it difficult to account for the conditions of historical transformation among the ontological regimes; also, the typology is underdetermined, lumping Greece and China in the class of 'analogism', besides ignoring the internal differences of ancient Greece — two aspects that go against Lloyd's historical sense of detail and differentialist outlook. In the case of my own work, the problem is of a different order, relating less to the possible historical transit between indigenous perspectivist animism and our multiculturalist naturalism, and more to an implicit suggestion that the ontologies in question do not make contact at all: 'is any mutual understanding between them possible?' (Lloyd 2007, 147). Thus, an even more radical discontinuity.

Lloyd fears that I, and to a certain point Descola, are intimating that the 'animist' and 'naturalist' worlds, to use my fellow Amazonianist's labels, are incommensurable, given the radically different conceptual systems in question. In his argument, this suspicion is associated to a 'multiple worlds

hypothesis', which would emerge from the thesis according to which the ethnographic differences registered 'extend to the realities in question and not just to the representations of them' (Lloyd 2010, 210).

Well, in some sense, I do subscribe to a multiple worlds hypothesis — in many senses, actually. Let us begin with the multiplication of 'natures' and of ontologies. I resort to 'the proud name of ontology' (Kant) for slightly different reasons than Descola's. I use it in a critical and analytical rather than descriptive and synthetic sense; my intention is to highlight the representationalist bias of the Western world-view, which supposes a single world or nature (ontological monism) around which different partial cultural views orbit (epistemic pluralism). This is the multiculturalist conception currently held by a majority of 'civilized' people; it is our modern cosmological vulgate, commendably tolerant and relativist — to a certain point (as always). For the problem with our democratic epistemology is that the world presupposed by the modern world-view as being absolutely transcendent, exterior as much to itself as to any other world-views, is presupposed by *that* world-view; it cannot but be *its* exterior then. And as we know, this view-specific exterior is literally exported lock, stock and barrel — as a world without a view — to other world-views that, being thereby deprived of their *own* exterior worlds, effectively break down into mere views — always a little myopic or cross-eyed, of course, being that they are *other* views of *our* world.

Against those who appear to prefer a 'multiple worlds hypothesis' to a 'multiple world-views one',<sup>10</sup> Lloyd pleads pleasantly: 'In some sense we all share the same world' (Lloyd 2010, 211). In some sense we all do, indeed; but in *some* sense — I am not sure whether it is not, unfortunately, the *same* sense — some of us hold much bigger shares of that common ontological capital.<sup>11</sup> And the fact remains that 'sense' is capacious enough a concept to allow for an untold number of worlds, given the wonderful indeterminateness (or should I say multidimensionality) of those two little words, 'some' and 'same'.

Also, I am not prepared to follow Lloyd when he infers, from the multiple worlds argument, the incommensurability or, more drastically, the unintelligibility between these different worlds. Our author seems to throw this inference more on the backs of certain philosophers than on Descola's or my own, in so far as our work is praised as evidence that cross-cultural understanding is an achievable goal:

Descola and Viveiros de Castro in particular do a remarkable job of describing not just what they understood about their subjects, the Achuar and the Araweté, for instance, but also what the Achuar and the Araweté themselves understood — even though what they understood is so different from what we might unguardedly assume was there for them to understand. (Lloyd 2010, 210)

As far as I am concerned, there is no way to separate (with the 'also') these two understandings — the anthropologist's and the natives' — given that my aim was precisely that of understanding what the Araweté understood, and thus to follow the consequences of *this* understanding for our (modern Western) ideas, with respect to *what there is* for us (humans) to understand. It

therefore seems to me that the concessive expression 'even though' opens a way, however narrow, to the very many worlds hypothesis that Lloyd is wary of. In the case of my ethnography, such a hypothesis refers to the indigenous ontological presuppositions: Amazonian perspectival multinaturalism is *itself* a 'many worlds hypothesis'. Or rather, it seemed to me that the most appropriate way to commensurate our conceptual apparatus with that of Amazonian peoples (with due excuses, again, for the doubly outrageous generalization) was to suggest a 'many-worlds interpretation'. The initial ethnographic problem, as I have said, was to discover the concepts appropriate to the *world* presupposed by the indigenous views — a question all the more interesting as what interested *those* views was, precisely, the views that the cosmos' multifarious denizens had of themselves and of their environment. And the critical experiment associated with this problem was that of speculating about the possible effects of such an exo-anthropological redescription or calibration of our own endo-anthropology: what happens, for example, when instead of conceiving of humanity as the end-product of the transcendence of an original animality, we presuppose it as immanent in the universe, as a general rather than special case of life? When the common condition of humanity and animality is not animality, but humanity? What happens to 'anthropology' when it coincides with 'cosmology'?

None of this implies incommensurability as a necessary premise or final outcome. It implies reciprocal unintelligibility even less. Amerindian perspectivism itself, like the recursive experiment that I made from it, deals precisely with the problem of commensuration as an activity — how to make what happens in a world correspond to what happens in another world. Not only do these worlds intersect in diverse dimensions, but also it is always possible to trace echoes and inter-intelligibilities there where they run on parallel tracks: it is always a problem of construction, in the mathematical sense of the expression. On the other hand, it seems that the multiple world-views hypothesis makes the life of the anthropologist too easy: it supposes that commensurability is given from the start, guaranteed by the unity of a world that is exterior to all world-views, when the challenge is exactly to construct a commensurability (i.e. a reciprocal mensurability) between the concepts in question — concepts that specify worlds, views and whatever else there is to be compared —, without the 'God-trick' (Donna Haraway) which is the recourse to a world 'out there' that works as impartial arbiter in the connections established by commensuration. All connections are partial, as Marilyn Strathern would have it. 'Commensuration' is defined in the O.E.D. as 'The measuring of things against or in comparison with each other'; there is no reference to an extrinsic standard of measurement to what is being measured. But to compare or commensurate is not to adjudicate. Leibniz's God excepted, no one is in a position to adjudicate on worlds. That is why I believe one has to take Lloyd's pluralism as far as it can go, raising, as it were, his multidimensionality of phenomena to the power of his multiple styles of inquiry — and then try and carry it a little farther still, by pluralizing this pluralism and varying our variations with the help of other people's cognitions of whatever they posit as possible objects of cognition, and their cognitive theories as well.



Some quick remarks by way of a conclusion. The controversy analysed by Lloyd, which opposes among other things very diverse theoretical and political sensibilities, sometimes to the point of aggressive incompatibility, is broadly based in certain strategic misunderstandings. No one denies that there are culturally specific phenomena (however one wants to define culture), nor that there are some cognitive tendencies and dispositions that characterize our species as a whole (and some others all primates, some others still all mammals, and so on). All, or almost all, today admit that there is no zero-sum game between culture and nature, also in the sense that any quantitative solution to the debate courts the ludicrous. To me the question seems to be if such commonalities and particularities are deployed in a unidimensional continuum or if, instead, there exists a radical heterogeneity in what we call cognition, as seems to be the case as much on the phenomenal or objective plane (I am not referring to modularity here, but rather to the diversity of cultural and political meanings and ends that 'knowledge' and related notions can be put to serve) as in that of styles of investigation. This is Lloyd's decisive conclusion. I would only add the suggestion that 'unity' and 'diversity', in the case of the debate under review, rather than being conceived as semantically homogeneous poles of a linear opposition, could perhaps be more advantageously imagined as constituting a case of 'multistable conception', in analogy with the notion of 'multistable perception': those perceptive phenomena that do not admit a non-ambiguous interpretation, figure and ground perpetually trading places as foci. It seems to be impossible to see nature and culture, unity and diversity at the same time; it is equally impossible not to play with the dramatic (and highly cognitive) effects of figure-ground reversal which, as we know, are widely used by the semiotic imagination of peoples around the world (Roy Wagner).

Or perhaps one should conclude that the debate between unitarians and diversitarians looks excessively like the dispute between Lilliput and Blefuscu about which end one should break boiled eggs.<sup>12</sup> In a less cynical key, we could inscribe the opposition between unity and diversity of the human mind in the list of typical Kantian antinomies — as the antinomy of anthropological reason, one might say, that our discipline cannot resolve but cannot avoid to put to itself.

Either way, I would really like to conclude this already long commentary with two citations. The first is from Barbara Herrnstein-Smith; it seems appropriate to the extent that it positively embraces and, at the same time, theoretically deflates the significance of the idea of incommensurability:

Incommensurability . . . is neither a logically scandalous relation between theories, nor an ontologically immutable relation between isolated systems of thought, nor a morally unhappy relation between sets of people, but a contingent, experiential relation between historically and institutionally situated conceptual/discursive practices. Some radically divergent ideas never meet at all, at least not in the experience of mortal beings. In other cases, meetings are staged repeatedly but never come off, ending only in mutual invisibility and inaudibility. Sometimes, however, meetings do occur, perhaps intensely conflictual and abrasive but also, in the long run, mutually transformative. Thus it may be that, at the end . . . when



all the stories are told and all the chips are in, counted, and compared, we will be unable not only to say who finally won but even to tell which was which. (Herrnstein-Smith 1997, 152).

The second is from Patrice Maniglier, which seems appropriate because it underlines that variation, which Lloyd knew how to show so well, far from being an obstacle, is an essential instrument of knowledge:

We can do something else with cultural variety than try to overcome it in order to find universal standards of truths, or, on the contrary, mourn over it and lament about the contingency of our standards: we can use it to understand ourselves better, and to understand us only in relation to others, which we discover through truth-variations. (Maniglier 2009)

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As well as the great comparative work by my fellow Amazonianist Philippe Descola (2005).
- <sup>2</sup> For I guess there is nothing wrong, once one is set on finding what marks out any object within a collection of similar objects, in searching for the principal differentiae that distinguish, say, the Nuer people of the Sudan as such. There is no real difference between these two searches for differentiae; there is no objective reason to think that what separates the human species as such from (say) other primates is somehow more relevant, from a generalized (non-existent) 'scientific' point of view, than what distinguishes the Nuer from their neighbours the Dinka — it all depends on the questions one is asking, what is one looking for, what differences make a difference from the point of view of one's particular inquiry. (The real difference between the Nuer and Dinka peoples is an old quandary in social anthropology; many an anthropologist would be inclined to say they are actually 'the same' people. But I suppose one could express the same doubts about humans and chimps, particularly if the primatologist asking the question were a New World monkey, a dolphin, or an octopus.)
- <sup>3</sup> There appears to me to be another question to be put before that, which is to find out whether the opponents *think* that they are talking about the same things at all. As I suggested in the previous paragraph, they may have far more in common than they suspect, particularly if/when they think they are *not* talking about the same things.
- <sup>4</sup> It is perhaps relevant to recall here the fact that all 'contemporary Amazonian societies of 150 people' are the surviving nodes of an ancient network which once spanned the entire New World — a complex of civilizations which was very differently constituted, morphologically as well as geopolitically, from the 'Great Traditions' of Eurasia, even if certain nodes of the network showed some similarities to the latter (e.g. the Andean and Mesoamerican polities).
- <sup>5</sup> Which was used to great effect, for example, in *Demystifying mentalities* (Lloyd 1990) to reject the application of the opposition between literal and metaphoric senses to cultural contexts that ignored — in the positive sense of the verb — such an opposition.
- <sup>6</sup> The polemic origins of the Greek *phusis*, which persist in the political uses of 'nature' since the Enlightenment at least, should not allow us to forget the no less polemic origins of the romanticist 'Kultur', mobilized by Herder to signify the distinctive values of particular human groups and thus resist the French and English 'civilization' conceit, which proposed (and imposed) itself as the ideal anthropological (and therefore, natural) norm. See Sahlins (2000), for fundamental reflections in this respect.
- <sup>7</sup> In Needham's case, the criticism seems fair; in that of Lévi-Strauss, it drastically oversimplifies the much more complex analysis to be found in the *Mythologiques* (cf. Viveiros de Castro 2009).
- <sup>8</sup> 'Perspectivism' is the name I gave to the Amerindian doctrine according to which all natural species (and even objects and artefacts) see themselves in human form, prehending (in the Whiteheadian sense) their characteristic 'natural' environments in terms of common (native, i.e. human) 'cultural' categories. Each species of being sees itself as human and the others as non-human: the jaguars see themselves as people, the blood of their prey as manioc beer, and humans (i.e. us) as wild pigs — the typical prey of (all) humans. What distinguishes the different species of human-like persons (frequently

defined as 'peoples': the jaguar-people, the kapok tree-people, the stone-people, etc.) are their distinctive bodies (and the 'natures' correspondent to them), which only become visible, however, to the eyes of other species, since apperception is universally anthropomorphic. In normal conditions, only shamans are able to penetrate the non-humanoid 'clothing' (the species body) of other beings and see them and their respective worlds as it were from within — as a human-like, albeit profoundly alien, world — thereby interacting with these other beings in equal (often dangerously tense) terms. See Viveiros de Castro (1998).

<sup>9</sup> Although, for Lloyd (personal communication, 2009), 'semantic stretch' is the rule for all

concepts, and the 'metaphoric/literal' distinction is the very example of a distinction that should *not* be taken literally.

<sup>10</sup> (Lloyd 2010, 210). To call the former a 'multiple worlds world-view' would be begging the question a little too much, I suppose.

<sup>11</sup> This point has been forcefully made by Roy Wagner (1981) and Bruno Latour (2002), among others; see Viveiros de Castro (2003) and Holbraad (2010) for similar formulations.

<sup>12</sup> The notion that all people 'naturally' eat eggs for breakfast was, of course, never in question. Some Amazonian peoples I know, on the contrary, find hens' eggs disgusting; now, *that* would open the possibility of a true dietetico-metaphysical disputation.

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## Notes on contributor

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro is an anthropologist that has conducted research in Brazilian Amazonia, most of it among the Araweté of the Middle Xingu. He was Simon Bolívar Professor of Latin American Studies in the University of Cambridge (1997–98) and Directeur de Recherche at the CNRS in Paris (1999–2001). His publications include *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), *A Inconstância da Alma Selvagem e Outros Ensaios de Antropologia*, *CosacNaify* (São Paulo, 2002) and *Métaphysiques cannibales* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

Correspondence to: [eviveirosdecastro@gmail.com](mailto:eviveirosdecastro@gmail.com)